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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper notes the reasons for public dissatisfaction with public education and provides objectives and suggests strategies for dealing with that problem. Seven objectives are presented in priority order: (1) to encourage educators to conduct regular, systematic, and substantive review of education programs: (2) to help citizens understand the value of education: (3) to increase the positive personal experiences between parents, nonparent taxpayers, and schools: (4) to increase the public relations awareness and skills of educators and school personnel: (5) to increase opportunities for the news media to present a more balanced view of the school system: (6) to urge educators to become intellectual leaders: and (7) to help citizens of all ages to understand the organization of schools at the local, state, and federal levels. The strategies encourage organizational involvement and public relations activities such as conducting programs, establishing liaisons with public interest groups, comissioning surveys, writing for publications, and providing organizational leadership and ideas through publications and conferences. In an addendum to the report, six additional items were examined to clarify the objectives and their strategies. (FG)

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REPORT OF THE FEOL COMMUNICATIONS STAFF TASK FORCE ON BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Forum of Educational Organization Leaders (FEOL) through its Public Awareness Task Force at its December 1979 meeting, recommended that the communications and public relations staff members of FEOL organizations develop for the Forum's consideration, a discussion paper which:

- recommends a specifically defined Forum agenda;
- recommends specifically defined strategies that may be used in addition to the creation of a think tank; and
- recommends specifically defined activities that Forum members might pursue jointly or independently.

Pursuant to that request we've held a number of meetings at the NSPRA offices in Rosslyn. We believe that the ideas that we have collectively assembled and forwarded to the FEOL can assist all of us in establishing coordinated themes and approaches, wherever possible, toward addressing this most important issue. The following report is submitted for your consideration.

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1. Defined Agenda -- That which needs attention.

   - Major problems as perceived by the public which are antithetical to positive and supportive of public confidence in education.
     - Discipline and antisocial behavior;
     - Declining test scores;
     - Lack of agreement on and specific knowledge of public education's goals;
     - Lack of specific knowledge of and agreement on the schools' agenda;
     - Bad press;

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- Fragmentation and the exacerbated adversary nature of most matters within the educational community (Boards v. Teachers v. Superintendents v. Community Pressure Groups, etc.);
- Professional competency of administrators and teachers;
- High costs of education which is not cost effective;
- Poor parental and adult involvement in public schools;
- Inhospitable environment in most schools turns most people off and/or frightens them away;
- Lack of coordinated educational leadership at all levels; and
- Lack of identification with the Jeffersonian Ideals about the indisputable value of education to the survival of a democratic society.

II. To address these and other problems as perceived by the public, the following objectives should be adopted:

1) To encourage educators to conduct regular, systematic substantive reviews of education programs to ensure that they best serve the public's needs and interests;

2) To help citizens understand the value of education in our democratic society;

3) To increase the number of positive personal experiences parents and non-parent taxpayers have with the schools;

4) To increase the importance of public relations awareness and skills of educators and all other school personnel;

5) To increase the opportunities for the news media to present a more balanced view of our nation's schools; and

6) To urge educators to become the intellectual leaders in their communities.

III. Some plausible strategies for addressing the aforementioned objectives are presented in recommended priority order.

OBJECTIVE #1: To encourage educators to conduct regular, systematic, substantive review of education programs to ensure that they best serve public needs and interests.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

1a. Print articles in their publications encouraging careful review of education programs versus community needs;

1b. Provide models and how-to-do-it examples of education program evaluations;

1c. Present sessions on education program evaluations at organization conventions, seminars and conferences;

1d. Provide organization leadership through publications and conferences for identifying ways schools might better meet community needs; and

1e. Provide organization ideas, suggestions and training through publications and conferences to help schools provide effective in-service training for all staff members to meet changing community needs.

OBJECTIVE #2: To help citizens understand the value of education in our democratic society.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

2a. Encourage and support efforts of a Citizens Committee for Public Education in America or some other organized effort as a means for reawakening citizens to the importance of public education in our democratic society;

2b. Seek to obtain and share testimonials from various persons who are willing to state publicly their feelings and general comments about how education has benefited them in their lives;

2c. Have their affiliates at the local level provide citizens with suggestions on ways to communicate the importance of education in our society;

2d. Establish a theme that carries the message that education is the cornerstone of our democracy;

2e. Contact other organizations, outside education, and suggest that they too consider "building confidence in public education" a priority project for the year; and

2f. Encourage local educators to establish liaison with local organizations to enlist their help in building confidence in our nation's schools.

OBJECTIVE #3: To increase the number of positive personal experiences parents and non-parent taxpayers have with the schools.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

3a. Encourage their local affiliates to get people to visit schools as parent or non-parent volunteers or just as interested citizens;

3b. Wherever appropriate, encourage local affiliates to start a regular "hassle list" to keep track of instances when the schools have needlessly provided parents, non-parents, students and others with unfavorable personal experiences with the schools. When hassles are identified, they should be handled immediately, to avoid the same approach in the future;

3c. Encourage educators through articles, speeches, and other methods, to remember the "little things" that demonstrate thoughtfulness and caring;

3d. Ask member organizations to actively present articles, workshops and speeches on the importance of personal experiences in formulating attitudes about the schools;

3e. Whenever appropriate, conduct regular surveys to determine current attitudes about the schools; summarize and publicize available data from existing surveys;

3f. Jointly encourage local school districts to listen and become sensitive to community attitudes through surveys, advisory committees, and other methods;

3g. Jointly provide a continuing explanation of the demographic changes taking place in our society to indicate that traditional methods for communicating may not be reaching a majority of citizens; and

3h. Encourage members to support the notion that attractive school buildings and grounds enhance each community.

OBJECTIVE #4: To increase the public relations awareness and skills of educators.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

4a. Help members see communication as a needed investment in time, energy and dollars;

4b. Make communication and the development of communications skills a key element of conventions, programs, academies and conferences. A communications component should be presented for each area being addressed;

4c. Present programs and articles to assist educators in accepting communications skills as survival skills;

4d. Organize a resource list of communications materials and make it available to all who are working to restore confidence in our nation's schools;

4e. Invite the National School Public Relations Association to become a member of the Forum;

4f. Urge colleges and universities to more adequately prepare educators for handling communications responsibilities related to their positions;

4g. Urge their own members to provide communications training for board members and all employees;

4h. Maintain an effective liaison with the Education Writers Association; and

4i. Define and communicate to educators those skills which are needed and urge local school districts to staff a communications position with a qualified person or persons in each local school district in the nation.

OBJECTIVE #5: To increase the opportunities for the news media to present a more balanced view of our nation's schools.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

5a. Provide a national monthly tip sheet as NSPRA is currently doing, of educational news, and encourage local school systems to do the same;

5b. Develop a good coordinated media list that will assure maximum effectiveness in communicating educational news through the news media;

5c. Prepare and regularly distribute background papers on various educational issues as a basis for later stories by the news media;

5d. Establish briefing sessions for interested media on various key educational issues;

5e. Develop an educational issues report card such as the Educational Leaders Consortium is doing;

5f. Establish an overall theme for confidence building efforts that will carry a common message through the news media;

5g. Conduct briefings for the Education Writers Association and prepare regular position papers for the EWA newsletter;

5h. Develop feature stories on topics and people;

5i. Seek to shed more light on success stories and make awards to those who have performed exceptional service through education;

5j. Consider syndicating columns such as NAESP's "Schools That Work."

5k. Share editorials with news media for possible placement; and

5l. Ask member organizations to make skill sessions on working with the media a part of conventions, seminars, academies, and conferences. Carry articles in publications on working with the media and helping educators understand the role of the media in our society. This effort should take place at the national, state and local levels.

OBJECTIVE #6: To urge educators to become the intellectual leaders in their communities.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

6a. Take an assertive stand in urging members to become active as intellectual leaders in their communities;

6b. Present feature articles and speeches by people who present role models for intellectual leadership in a community;

6c. Urge colleges and universities to better prepare educators for their roles as community leaders;

6d. Develop model job descriptions and evaluation instruments that encourage intellectual leadership on the part of board members, administrators, teachers and others in education;

6e. Present convention, academy or conference programs on the topic of intellectual leadership in the community;

6f. Ask George Gallup to prepare articles defining intellectual leadership, presenting these articles in their publications;

6g. Establish a theme reflecting the need for intellectual leadership and pointing out that educators should be looked upon for intellectual leadership in their communities;

6h. Ask the National Teacher of the Year to challenge educators to become intellectual leaders; and

6i. Request key educational leaders, such as state superintendents, presidents and executive directors of state and national associations, to continually call for intellectual leadership on the part of all educators as they relate to their communities.

OBJECTIVE #7: To help citizens of all ages understand how public schools are organized, financed and governed at the local, state and federal levels.

Suggested Strategies -- Member organizations should:

7a. Encourage school systems to include curricula offerings on the functions, operations and governance of local school systems. This offering should be available to regular students, adult education students and in-service for the regular staff;

7b. Encourage higher education institutions to provide preservice and in-service curricula offerings on the functions, operations and governance of local school systems;

7c. Develop and implement a systematic coordinated mass media campaign which provides a simplified version of the workings of local school systems. This should be aimed for the use of both the electronic and print media;

7d. Encourage local school systems to use their own instruments to provide, to the fullest extent possible, information on the functions, operations and governance of the public schools; and

7e. Encourage member organizations to offer convention and other programs which provide information on the functions, operations and governance of the public schools. Emphasis should be on the prospects as well as the problems.

jsh
5/27/80

ADDENDUM TO THE REPORT
OF THE
FEOL COMMUNICATIONS STAFF TASK FORCE
ON
BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Pursuant to the unanimous action of the FEOL on March 21, 1980, in response to the Communications Staff Task Force Report, the following items have been reconsidered for further study. Specifically, we were requested to examine:

1) Target populations -- specify;

2) Mechanisms need development for use at the local, state, and federal levels;

3) Social indicators of problems in schools -- collect;

4) Things that work in schools -- identify;

5) Ways to enhance teamwork -- identify; and

6) The Forum members' special contributions -- isolate.

Because of the diversity of the organizations making up the Forum, the Communications staff does not believe it is possible for us to establish a precise prescription in each of the aforementioned areas which is completely workable in every case. However, given the nature of the organizations themselves we believe that one or more of the following identifications will apply in each case.

1. Target Populations - as referred to in objectives 1, 4, 6 and 7 we mean the membership served by individual Forum organizations (e.g., local school board members, state boards of education members, Chief State School Officers, superintendents, central office staffs of local school districts, principals, teachers, students, college professors and administrators, governors and state legislators, parents and selected federal officials.

-- external publics as referred to in objectives 2, 3 and 5 we mean those individuals or groups who have some type of relationship, albeit indirect, with the Forum's member organizations (e.g., news media, non-parent taxpayers, civic organizations, civil rights organizations, chambers of commerce, other associations, etc.).

2. Mechanism development - This is a task which must be done by the individual Forum organizations. Procedurally we recommend the following:

   - Each organization should schedule and hold a work session with its board of directors on this overall topic using this report as a basic working document;

   - Each board of directors should identify its own priority objectives from among those cited in the report and perhaps others;

   - Each board of directors should direct that specific program activities be developed for their adoption which are aimed at fulfilling the requirements of the specified objectives; and

   - Each board of directors should use the established channels and procedures that are normally used to implement organizational programs to see that some systematic action is directed toward the improvement of public confidence in our schools. (Presumably this sequence is: plan and develop program; establish priority; budget resources; put program into action; evaluate and then replan, rebudget and reevaluate).

3. Social indicators of problems in schools - a partial listing.

   - High absentee and dropout rates

   - High suspension and expulsion rates

   - Low attendance at board meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and other non-athletic and non-artistic functions

   - Changes in rate of participation in school board elections

   - Conflicting attitudes about educational matters as reflected in the Gallup and other polls

- Drug and alcohol abuse by students and adults
- Impact of changing demographics of families and homes
- School staff burnout and turnover
- Board member resignations and self-imposed limitations on amount, length and time of school board service
- Fluctuating magnitude of school volunteers

4. Things that work in schools - identify.

   - We refer the Forum members to: Building Public Confidence For Your Schools - A Source Book of Proven PR Practices, National School Public Relations Association, 1978, Arlington, Virginia.

     We caution that this extensive volume was written for the local school district. Thus, the use of its recommendations by Forum members will likely have to be guided by the nature of the relationship which these organizations have with local school districts.

5. Ways of enhancing teamwork - identify.

   Enhancing teamwork toward resolving some of the outstanding issues related to the current level of public confidence in education will likely depend on the establishment of a high degree of consensus on common strategies and approaches. We believe that such a consensus might be achieved for the following activities:

   - The Forum should commission a poll to gain additional insight into public attitudes about schools. Find out what people know and don't know about school operations and why.
   - The Forum should establish as a part of its ongoing program some study on the relationship of existing social indicators to what people think about schools. That is, how do the existing social indicators affect what people respond on polls about schools? Answers to that question might help the Forum decide exactly what it should be doing in this area and which organization(s) are best equipped to do it.

- The Forum should use subcommittees and/or task forces whose specific charge is to recommend ways of developing joint endeavors and enhancing teamwork.

6. Forum members' special contributions - isolate.

   Time did not permit us to create examples of special contributions of each Forum member for each of the seven objectives and their attending suggested strategies. However, as a general rule we believe that those suggested strategies aimed at unique groups should be spearheaded by the comparable group within the Forum. I.E., teachers-AFT and NEA; principals-NAESP and NASSP; state boards of education-state school officers; governors and legislators-NASBE, CCSSO and ECS; local school board members-NSBA; higher education-AACTE; and parents-PTA. Since the federal level overarches all of these groups our opinion is that its role should be a supporting one.

jsh
5/9/80